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ABSTRACT

Current efforts and methodologies to evaluate vocational education programs are plagued by a number of problems. Included among these are the following: disagreement over the primary role and function of vocational education, too great an emphasis on summative and product evaluation as well as on labor market outcomes as indicators of program effectiveness, insufficient consideration of the educational and community setting, and overreliance on positivist evaluation inquiry. A new approach is needed to overcome these problems and deficiencies. One such approach is that of critical evaluation. A method based on the assumption that persons bring different perceptions and vested interests concerning an issue to the evaluation process, critical evaluation is concerned with both the process by which a decision is reached and the outcome or action itself. The critical evaluation approach directly addresses the issues raised by individuals in the local setting as being necessary for program change and relies upon quantitative and qualitative data to develop action plans and change strategies for program improvement. (MN)

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CRITICAL EVALUATION FOR VOCATIONAL EDUCATION

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FOREWORD

The last two decades have seen the expenditure of considerable resources on the evaluation of vocational education programs. At the same time, there has been intensified criticism of the usefulness of evaluation findings, the criteria used in evaluation efforts, and the methodology employed to evaluate vocational education programs. If program evaluation is to point the direction for program improvement in vocational education, then vocational education must be willing to reexamine program evaluation and to identify and resolve the crucial problems limiting the effectiveness of evaluation.

Research on program effectiveness and school improvement shows the need to consider two crucial areas if desired changes are to occur: school culture and stakeholders' needs. Current evaluation approaches with their heavy reliance on quantitative measures do not adequately address these issues and are therefore of limited value. Critical evaluation, proposed in this publication, overcomes those limitations, not by rejecting quantitative approaches, but by emphasizing the importance of stakeholder involvement; the need to consider the program's specific context; the need to analyze data in light of stakeholder values, beliefs, and attitudes; and the need to achieve consensus among stakeholders on proposed program improvement actions.

It is the intent of this publication to provide local and State vocational educators with a brief overview and introduction to critical evaluation in vocational education. This is not an implementation document, but rather an information source to broaden the awareness of the potential for positive change through the use of critical evaluation. Critical evaluation shows promise of enabling vocational educators to develop more practical and acceptable plans for improving vocational education programs.

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Improved program evaluation approaches are needed if vocational educators are to meet the demands of their constituencies for more effective programs. This publication reviews the limitations of current evaluation efforts and suggests critical evaluation as an approach that overcomes these deficiencies.

Critical evaluation is based on the assumption that persons bring different perceptions and vested interests about an issue to the evaluation process. This is important because change is situation specific and involves moving the school culture from less effective to more effective ways of functioning. Critical evaluation is concerned with both the process by which a decision is arrived at and the outcome or action itself. Another tenet of critical evaluation is the need for stakeholder involvement--to develop the necessary momentum and support for appropriate and relevant programs.

As a natural outflow from the findings on effective schools and the change process, critical evaluation directly addresses the issues raised by individuals in the local setting as being necessary for meaningful program change. Quantitative and qualitative data are used to develop action plans and change strategies for program improvement. The benefits derived from the use of critical evaluation include stakeholder involvement, meaningful information, context-specific recommendations, and consensus on recommendations.

CHAPTER 1

THE NEED FOR NEW DIRECTIONS

Excellence in vocational education has become a major concern of vocational educators and the general public. The call for excellence has come at a time of rapid social and technological change coupled with fierce competition for public funds. These concerns have placed additional demands on vocational educators to improve programs. In order to improve programs, vocational educators need information about their programs--information that should be provided through program evaluation efforts.

Current Evaluation Efforts in Vocational Education

Much of the evaluation effort in vocational education has been driven by the requirements of Federal legislation. The Education Amendments of 1976, which mandated evaluation in terms of training-related placement and employer satisfaction with former vocational education students, have had the most impact on program evaluation. Additionally, States were required by the amendments of 1976 to review programs once every 5 years. The Carl D. Perkins Vocational Education Act of 1984 also designates specific measures of effectiveness for vocational education program evaluation. The designated measures include the occupations for which to be trained, which should reflect a realistic assessment of the labor market needs of the state, and the levels of skills to be achieved in particular occupations, which should reflect the hiring needs of employers. Additionally, the Act specifies that basic employment competencies to be used in performance outcomes, which should also reflect the hiring needs of employers. The requirement for program evaluations by the State once each 5 years continues in the 1984 act.

As long as States receive Federal funds that are subsequently targeted to local programs, Federal regulations will have considerable impact on State and local evaluations. However, State and local vocational educators have nevertheless been relatively free to select the evaluation processes to be used in fulfilling these requirements.

NOTE: For a more extensive treatment of the topics discussed in this publication the reader is referred to a companion publication, J. Farley, F. McKinney, A. Kohan, M. Smith, and F. Pratzner. Reconceptualization of Vocational Education Program Evaluation (Columbus: The National Center for Research in Vocational Education, The Ohio State University, 1985).

States have generally complied with Federal requirements for program reviews by setting up review processes similar to the accreditation model of evaluation. These program reviews have been characterized by three sequential components: (1) a self-study (internal review) by the educational agency being evaluated; (2) an on-site visit by an external review team; and (3) a procedure for correcting deficiencies uncovered by the team. The internal review is most often the responsibility of teachers and administrators and is usually seen as preparation for the on-site visit of the external review team. The on-site team visit is, in most states, a means of verifying the locally conducted self-study. External review teams usually emphasize inputs and process variables. However, many local school personnel include placement rates and student achievement as part of the information in the self-study report.

Former student follow-up studies are frequently conducted by vocational educators. Follow-up studies conducted at the state and local levels vary greatly in their objectives, the kind of data collected, and the quality of the undertaking. In more recent years studies of employer satisfaction with former vocational education students have increased in use by local education agencies.

Problems with Current Evaluation Efforts

Program improvement is essentially a local initiative. Federal and State governments may stimulate and support improvement efforts, but the commitment and activities essential to program improvement remain centered at the local level, where programs are planned, conducted, and evaluated.

If program evaluation is to contribute to program improvement, it must provide useful information to vocational education decision makers and policymakers. However, current vocational education evaluation approaches have met with increasing criticism from those who believe they have not helped in local program improvement. Criticisms of current practices have often focused on the following five areas.

Disagreement over the Primary Role and Function of Vocational Education

The evaluation of vocational education is often based on a model that emphasizes the economic consequences of student's participation in vocational education. Federal legislation and regulations have required attention to labor market outcomes; however, this has frequently been inconsistent with the values and objectives of many local practitioners. Many contend that vocational education serves social and educational roles that are at least as important as its economic role. It is difficult, if not

impossible, to focus program evaluation activities when there is such sharp disagreement concerning the role and function of vocational education.

Emphasis on Summative and Product Evaluations

Most formal evaluations have focused on products or outcomes of vocational education programs at the time of learner completion. Evaluations frequently use indicators such as job placement rates, employers' levels of satisfaction with former students, and former student tenure in jobs. Summative and product evaluations are important, but they seldom consider information about the activities and processes related to program outcomes. Furthermore, they provide little direction in building an agenda for improving the vocational education program. Evaluation results should lead to a better understanding of the relationship of program inputs to outcomes. If program improvement is the goal of evaluation, then vocational educators need an indication of which program processes to adjust to improve performance.

Evaluative Emphasis on Labor Market Outcomes

Program evaluation in vocational education has emphasized labor market outcomes with considerably less attention given to educational outcomes. The job placement rates and earnings of former students are frequently studied; other outcomes, such as interpersonal relations skills, problem-solving skills, economic literacy, career planning, and pursuit of additional education, have received minimal attention.

Insufficient Consideration of the Educational and Community Setting

The quality of learning is significantly affected by the total educational context (e.g., counseling processes, administrative support) and community context (e.g., social mores, labor market structures) in which learning occurs. Program evaluations in vocational education have not adequately taken into account the processes and relationships within the school and the community that may contribute to program improvement.

Overreliance on Positivist Evaluation Inquiry

The dominant research and evaluation methodology in vocational education has been heavily influenced by the positivistic model of science. Proponents assert that this model is the best way to acquire credible knowledge. Research and evaluation methodology based on this model reduces the human and social

aspects of vocational education to discrete, independent and dependent variables and is, thus, unable to capture the complexity and holistic nature of vocational education programs. Moreover, the methodology relies on quantitative measurement and extensive, sophisticated statistical analysis. Thus, the variables selected for evaluation and data analysis methods used are nearly always selected by "experts" who are all too frequently far removed from the program being evaluated.

Need for a New Approach

The results of evaluation should increase the potential of policymakers and decision makers to improve vocational education programs. The typical approach to enhancing evaluation effectiveness in recent years has been to increase the sophistication of the methods, procedures, and techniques used. This strategy, which does not necessarily lead to more useful results, has alienated many individuals at the local school level.

Policymakers tend to be enamored with quantitative data, but the irony is that they often make the most use of anecdotal data when engaged in policy-making. Vocational education is a complex and diverse array of programs, activities, and services. It exists in complex school and community environments. An evaluation approach is needed that provides a realistic picture of vocational education and the environment in which it exists.

CHAPTER 2

A CRITICAL EVALUATION FRAMEWORK

In order to overcome the problems and deficiencies of the current program evaluation efforts in vocational education a new framework is needed. The evaluation framework proposed in this publication is based in critical theory. It retains many of the beneficial aspects of current evaluation efforts and is designed to lead to improved vocational education programs.

Theoretical Basis for Program Evaluation Framework

Critical theory is based on the assumption that persons bring to the evaluation process different perceptions of, and vested interests in a given issue. Critical evaluation emphasizes the questioning of basic, commonly held assumptions. This questioning, to the extent possible, should take place in an atmosphere of free and nonthreatening communication among those who are involved in or affected by the educational enterprise, the stakeholders (e.g., teachers, administrators, students, counselors, employers, parents, citizens). Unless stakeholder underlying assumptions are brought out in the open and recognized, meaningful consensus cannot be gained and plans for program improvement cannot be realized. Critical theory is as concerned with the process by which a decision is reached as with the outcome or action resulting from the decision.

Program evaluation based on critical theory is concerned with (1) the understandings and motives resulting in human action, (2) the way programs are altered as individuals develop better understandings of program processes and structures, (3) the role of evaluators as participants in the program improvement process rather than as disinterested observers, and (4) stakeholders engaging in a self-education process about the vocational education program and the environment in which it exists. In critical evaluation, the self-education process is seen as one that permits understandings and actions to develop, with the result being that programs change to become consistent with enlightened viewpoints.

The Evaluation Framework

Many people think of evaluation as a precise step-by-step process. While critical evaluation may proceed according to a logical order of activities, it is likely that many of the activities will occur during the same time period. An action at one point in time may mean that an action taken previously needs to

be reconsidered and possibly altered. Figure 1 provides an illustration of critical evaluation in vocational education. To a great degree, the activities shown in figure 1 are interactive.

Context for Critical Evaluation

A context for generating evaluation knowledge about the vocational education program is created when (1) agreement among stakeholders regarding shared viewpoints break down or are called into question, and (2) the communication or interaction among stakeholders ordinarily used to resolve questions is no longer understood by the stakeholders (i.e., it is not shared communication). The four conditions necessary for shared oral or written communication are:

- Statements must be comprehensible and intelligible; that is, involved stakeholders must be able to understand each other. Misunderstandings must be clarified before further communication can occur.

- Statements must be accurate or true. Statements should be congruent with all available and mutually recognized pertinent information about the problem.

- Statements must be sincere in intent (e.g., there must be no hidden motives behind the communication). The individuals engaged in conversation must be truthful and trustful of each other's intentions.

- Communication must occur in a context where individuals feel free to express themselves without fear of reprisal.

As shown in figure 1, the ongoing reflection and discourse are central to the conduct of critical evaluation. These are not methodological steps; rather, they pervade the critical evaluation process. Reflection is the process of identifying, making explicit, and critically examining all of assumptions, values, and beliefs underlying the knowledge and understandings that are accepted or taken-for-granted by stakeholders. It is an ongoing, continuous process engaged in by stakeholders to validate periodically existing beliefs and to identify distortions, changes, or mismatches that may have occurred over time between accepted knowledge and understandings and the underlying norms or standards. Engaging in reflection helps stakeholders discover why things are the way they are and develop insights about ways to improve programs.

Discourse is the formal, lengthy, earnest, and intelligent discussion of a subject, either written or spoken. It has also been defined as the process or power of reasoning. In critical evaluation, the term is used in both of these senses. Discourse is a means of resolving questions about the accuracy and truth of

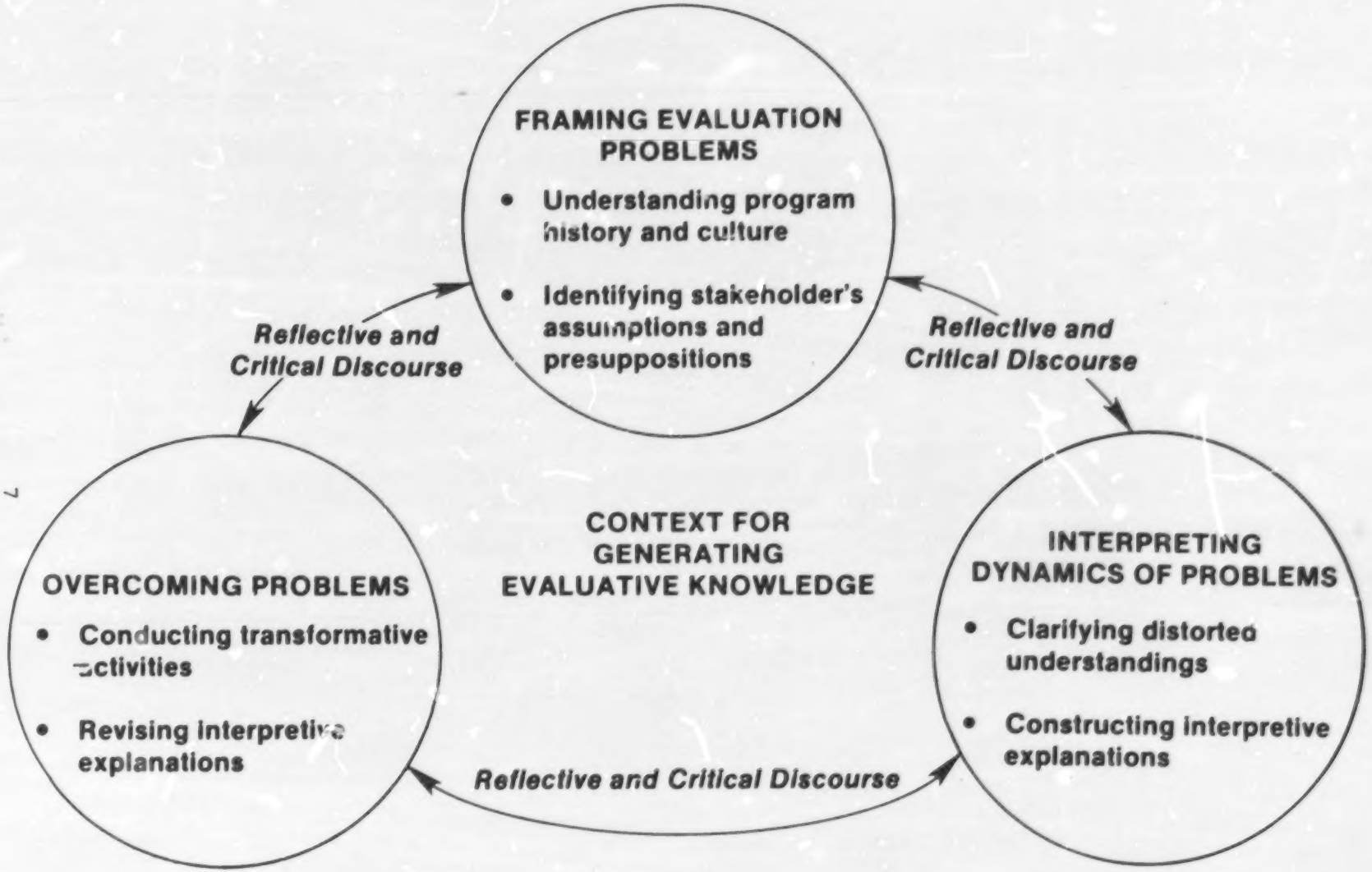
FRAMING EVALUATION PROBLEMS
• Understanding program history and culture
• Identifying stakeholder's assumptions and presuppositions
Reflective and Critical Discourse
Reflective and Critical Discourse
OVERCOMING PROBLEMS
• Conducting transformative activities
• Revising interpretive explanations
CONTEXT FOR GENERATING EVALUATIVE KNOWLEDGE
INTERPRETING DYNAMICS OF PROBLEMS
• Clarifying distorted understandings
• Constructing interpretive explanations
Reflective and Critical Discourse

Figure 1. Critical evaluation in vocational education

viewpoints or knowledge claims. Through discourse, stakeholders arrive at a consensus on statements of knowledge that are logical, accurate, and rational. Like reflection, critical discourse must be an ongoing activity in a critical evaluation.

In evaluating a vocational education program, it is important to understand how the program has evolved over time through the development of certain accepted values or norms. Through communicative action, individuals and groups that are members of a community have agreed on these values or norms. These norms have provided the context in which certain community interests are achieved through the vocational education program. For example, in some communities, it is deemed important for the school to provide students with meaningful cooperative work experiences related to student career goals. The values placed on cooperative work experience are then an important part of the contextual information essential for effective program evaluation.

These norms vary not only from one community to another but also within communities. Ethnic groups, racial groups, age groups, and gender groups within a given community may be guided by radically different norms. The critical evaluation framework encourages those engaged in evaluation efforts to seek an understanding of these differences and how they might affect the vocational education program.

Framing Problems in Critical Evaluation

As indicated in figure 1, framing problems includes both the identification of problems to be addressed during the evaluation and the interpretation stakeholders have of these problems, based on their experiences.

Particular attention must be paid to the reference points stakeholders use in interpreting vocational education programs. The viewpoints stakeholders hold are heavily influenced by their ideas and perceptions of vocational education and their relationship to it. These ideas and perceptions may be fairly consistent over time or they may be revised as circumstances change. An example of this change can be seen in how some stakeholders perceive the need for a school-based job placement office. When jobs are easy to find, the job placement office may not be deemed very important. However, in times of high unemployment, these same stakeholders may view the job placement office as being very important.

Understanding the cultural setting and clarifying viewpoints are activities that provide the backdrop for formulating evaluation problems or questions to be addressed. As stakeholders interact with each other, obstacles to the vocational education program will become evident, as will any discrepancies between intended and actual program developments. An example of this is

the discrepancy between the former Federal legislative emphasis on job placement and the emphasis of some programs on employability skills. For many local schools, this situation creates an evaluation problem relating to program goal clarification. Once such evaluation problems are formulated, they are not set aside but are analyzed throughout the evaluation process for possible modifications.

Interpreting Problem Dynamics in Critical Evaluation

A major consideration in critical evaluation, as shown in figure 1, is clarifying understandings and constructing explanations. One of the major aims of critical evaluation is to develop understandings of how and why the vocational education program has evolved into what it is. Only in this way can stakeholders clearly identify problem sources and constraints. One of the distinctive characteristics of critical evaluation is the participation of stakeholders in this interpretive process. Such participation is necessary because the activities and attendant beliefs, values, and meanings of individual stakeholders make up the vocational education program. That is, at least some stakeholders need to feel that they "own" the idea for change or innovation. Thus, program improvement can occur only through the conscious activities of these individuals and groups.

Participation is also necessary in order to conduct discourse examining the accuracy of stakeholder explanations about the vocational education program. Participation in discourse helps to identify possible misinterpretations on the part of stakeholders, such as mistaken readings of the situation, inappropriate value positions, or claims based on self-serving interests. Explanations based on misunderstanding are distorted; thus, understanding must be sought through discourse among relevant stakeholder groups.

This process of achieving understandings is similar to that of deciphering a code. One is frequently confronted with an array of complex information. One may need to use various methodologies for obtaining information about the problem being evaluated. State-of-the-art research findings may also be brought to bear in order to make sense of the problem. Interpreting the problem involves data gathering, social and historical analysis, and stakeholder reflection and discourse. Interpreting the problem gets at questions lying at the heart of critical evaluation: Why? How did it come about? In whose interests? How does it fit into the larger educational, social, and political contexts?

Finally, it should be noted that the critical evaluation process cannot be expected to yield a single explanation that will be valid for all time and in all contexts. Rather, it can be expected to yield a valid explanation of current vocational

education reality that will clarify sources of current problems and suggest opportunities and strategies for modifying programs. With the passage of time, this interpretive explanation must be subjected to reanalysis, critiqued, and reconstructed.

Overcoming Problems in Critical Evaluation

As shown in figure 1, once the vocational education reality is clarified, obstacles to program improvement efforts must be identified. Obstacles are those conditions, situations, and so forth that impede change and that are perceived to be real by those in the vocational education setting. If obstacles are not perceived as problems by those in the setting, then attempts to overcome those obstacles become solo efforts by the "evaluator" as expert. As a result, participants in the setting become removed from the evaluation effort, and the power of critical evaluation is forfeited.

Transformative actions are attempts to penetrate and remove obstacles to program improvement; that is, they are efforts to create change. Purchasing new or updated equipment for the school's vocational shops may be an example of a transformative action. Effective transformative actions solve problems and may cause new interpretive explanations of reality to emerge as well. The school that purchases new equipment may discover that another problem is created because teachers cannot operate the new equipment. Thus, new interpretations of the situation may illuminate more problems and, consequently, call for further actions. In essence, this reality transformation, in which actions lead to the perception of new problems and their resolution, is a perpetual process.

Stakeholder Involvement in Critical Evaluation

The largest asset of a vocational education program is human beings. Those individuals involved in and affected by the program (stakeholders)--students, teachers, administrators, counselors, parents, employers, and others--are the key ingredients in the vocational education program's success or failure. Substantial evidence suggests that successful businesses have adopted this principle and have moved from "trusting the system" to "trusting people." These businesses have learned that worker output is increased when individuals are given a chance to influence their own destiny.

Successful schools have also discovered that trust in those people who are stakeholders results in more productive schools. This principle is not, however, universally practiced. Many of the suggested solutions to the problems of vocational education cannot be imposed at the State or local management level. These

"quick-fix" solutions do not involve stakeholders, as is necessary for effective program improvement.

Currently, much of the change in vocational education occurs in a very disruptive fashion, frequently in reaction to some external pressure group or legislative initiative. A major strength of the ongoing involvement of stakeholders in the critical evaluation process is that change is not disruptive, but evolves in keeping with the changing needs of society and of the vocational education reality. Critical evaluation in vocational education focuses on program improvement that results from the intensive participation of stakeholders in identifying the problem, collecting information about the problem, and designing strategies for solving the problem.

Evaluation as a Continuing Educative Process

A fundamental difference between critical evaluation and most other forms of evaluation currently practiced in vocational education is the involvement of stakeholders. This involvement is not to be construed as "window dressing." The spirit of innovation and experimentation so critical to program improvement is dependent upon sustained and rigorous dialogue among stakeholders. A major aim is for stakeholders to better understand their positions and the culture in which they operate. Enlightened stakeholders are in a much better position to alter those conditions they find detrimental to excellent programs.

The educative process is a continuing activity. Stakeholders viewing their past actions can see how social conditions and remedies suggested for problems may interact both to improve programs and contribute to new problem areas. Continuing involvement in the evaluation process helps keep stakeholders aware of changing conditions and encourages the development of understandings and actions appropriate for program improvement. Through this process, critical evaluation permits stakeholders to attain a deeper awareness of the reality that shapes the vocational education program and of their capacity to improve that reality.

Critical Evaluation at Different Levels

Because the extensive involvement of stakeholders is an essential part of critical evaluation, it is most suited for use at the local education level. This is consistent with the fact that school improvement is basically a local initiative.

However, some elements of critical evaluation are applicable at every level. Certainly, the need to involve stakeholders in State and Federal evaluation efforts is clear. The advantages of having stakeholders engage in critical reflection and discourse

are not confined to the local level. However, State and federal demands for program accountability often results in a reliance on quantitative data. Attempts to develop more qualitative understandings of the program are often de-emphasized. Nevertheless, the latter is essential for local school program improvement.

Distinguishing Features

We have suggested that critical evaluation can serve as an alternative to conventional ways of evaluating vocational education programs. What, then, distinguishes critical evaluation from current evaluation efforts?

Understanding the Past

Vocational education programs do not exist outside of their historical context. A historical understanding of the ways the vocational education program is based on the community and school culture and on the experiences of stakeholders is an essential aspect of critical evaluation. Through reflection and discourse, stakeholders can formulate explanations of the program's development. By understanding the past, stakeholders will be in a better position to propose changes for program improvement.

Communication

As has been emphasized, discourse among stakeholders is a key feature of critical evaluation. These intense discussions among stakeholders involve self-reflection and are intended to reveal unexamined motives, meanings, and intentions.

Stakeholder Involvement

Critical evaluation relies on and promotes the democratic participation of stakeholders. Vocational education is a particularized program that reflects the interests, motivations, and needs of a complex and diverse group of stakeholders. Many of the benefits of extensive and in-depth stakeholder involvement are long-range. Because of their involvement, fundamental changes in stakeholders' attitudes can result in significant program changes.

Continuing Evaluation Effort

Critical evaluation does not have discrete beginning and ending points. It is a continuous process in which problem clarification, problem interpretation, and problem solving always interact. As the context changes, the problem changes, the

information needed to examine the problem changes, and the most feasible solution may change. The selection of a solution may create conditions that will contribute to other problems. Program improvement is not a static affair. It demands attention through an interactive, continuing evaluation process.

Other distinguishing features of critical evaluation can be cited (e.g., capacity to use information collected and analyzed from the positivist and interpretive traditions, the continuing educative function); however, those discussed above are the most important ones. A careful study of the features that distinguish critical evaluation from current evaluation efforts in vocational education reveals the enormous potential contribution critical evaluation can make to program improvement.

Considerations for Implementation

Time

Vocational educators considering the implementation of critical evaluation should recognize that a substantial amount of time will be required for stakeholders to engage in reflection and discourse. There is no magic answer to the question, "How much time will be required?" Time requirements depend on the complexity and diversity of the program, the nature of the problems studied, and so forth. The time required should be viewed as a solid investment in improved programs.

Democratic Participation

For critical evaluation to achieve optimal results, it is essential that school administrators create an open and noncoercive environment, giving access to information and encouraging discussion of all aspects of evaluation problems. Stakeholders must be convinced that any comments they make will not be held against them. Participants in the evaluation process also need to understand how their recommendations will affect decision making and policymaking.

Truth

Critical evaluation is committed to seeking valid conclusions based on historical perspectives and an understanding of underlying beliefs, values, and meanings. This commitment is considerably different than that of current evaluation efforts. Those deciding to initiate critical evaluation should recognize that what vocational education evaluation approaches have thought of as "truth" may be substantially revised or altered in critical evaluation.

CHAPTER 3

ANTICIPATED BENEFITS OF USING CRITICAL EVALUATION

Research on effective schools supports the fact that impact on learner achievement is possible. The challenge then is to implement a process that will enable schools to improve their vocational education programs.

The research and literature regarding effective schools and the change process strongly suggest that program improvement is much more likely to occur when there is--

- o involvement of the stakeholders in the program improvement process;
- o attention to the complex interrelationships of values, beliefs, attitudes, and norms that exist among stakeholders;
- o an understanding of the historical aspects of a program's development and of the current school and community culture in which the program is situated;
- o an atmosphere among stakeholders that encourages nonthreatening intellectual discussion that can lead to consensus and unity.

The critical evaluation framework proposed for vocational education directly addresses these key considerations for implementing school improvement efforts. Following are some of the major benefits to be expected when using critical evaluation.

Stakeholder Support

It is no secret that individuals are more enthusiastic in their support of ideas and changes when they have been meaningfully involved in the generation of the ideas and changes. The proposed critical evaluation framework relies on extensive involvement of stakeholders as an essential ingredient of the evaluation effort, involvement at a much greater depth than that typical of most current evaluation efforts. Without question, this kind of involvement will result in stakeholders having intense feelings and beliefs about the value of their proposals for program improvement.

Meaningful Information

Information about a program fails to achieve optimal impact unless it is interpreted in light of stakeholder values, beliefs,

and feelings. The critical evaluation framework permits the use of quantitative and qualitative information appropriate to the problem under evaluation. This information becomes more meaningful as stakeholders interact with each other and interpret the information in light of their feelings, beliefs, and attitudes.

Context-specific Recommendations

When the critical evaluation framework is used, the actions identified as appropriate for improving the program will be specific to a particular situation. The emphasis on the program's historical development and the interaction among program stakeholders will help assure that recommendations for program improvement are tailored to meet the needs of the specific setting. This should enhance the utility of evaluation findings considerably.

Consensus on Recommendations

Most current evaluation efforts are dominated by an individual or small group of individuals, representative of some central authority figure. Such efforts are certainly not stakeholder based. In critical evaluation, honest and earnest attempts are made to achieve consensus among stakeholders. This consensus building in all phases of critical evaluation gives recommendations for program improvement a better chance of being implemented.

Critical evaluation is a fundamental and radical departure from current vocational education program evaluation efforts. It incorporates both the common sense of stakeholders and a strong theoretical base. Vocational educators searching for a more flexible, sensible, and practical approach to program improvement should explore thoroughly the merits of critical evaluation.

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